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NORTH DUDLEY AREA COMMITTEE

Thursday 8th December 2005, at 6.30 p.m.
at Dormston Sports Hall, Millbank, Sedgley

PRESENT

Councillor Mrs Ameson Chairman)
Councillors Caunt, G H Davies, Evans, Mottram, Ridney, Ryder,
Simms, Stanley and Wright

Officers

The Director of Childrens' Services (as Area Liaison Officer), Assistant Director (Childrens' Services), Assistant Director of Law and Property (Legal and Democratic Services), and Mrs Holland (Directorate of Law and Property),

Approximately 25 members of the public were in attendance.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Member's Code of Conduct Councillors Mrs Ameson, Evans, Davies, Mottram, Stanley, Mrs Ridney and Wright submitted a Personal Interest in view of their separate roles as Governors of schools within the Dudley Borough.

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APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Mrs Millward and Councillor Fraser Macnamara.

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INVESTING IN THE FUTURE: PRIMARY SCHOOLS REVIEW

A report of the Director of Childrens' Services considered by Cabinet on 17th November 2005 was submitted on the background to the Primary Schools Review.

The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) presented the report, stating that the reason for change was the fact that projected pupil enrolment for the forthcoming years had fallen and that the affordability of maintaining surplus places was not sustainable, in that Primary pupil numbers were projected to fall by 2,358 (9%) between 2005 and 2010, resulting in a reduction in budget of £7.8 million. Overall this would result in a budget reduction of £50,000 for each school within the

Borough and would have serious implications on staffing and the quality of education and the decision was made to close five schools from 31st August 2006. School closure notices had been published on 22nd November 2005, following which several meetings had been held with Head Teachers to discuss the next stage. He explained that the children from Highfields Primary School would be moved to Christchurch Church of England Primary School. Meetings with Governing Bodies would be undertaken in the near future. The aim was to create 21st century schools that would include extended school facilities, community use, childcare, adult education and sports and leisure facilities.

The Assistant Director also reported that it had been agreed that parents affected by closures would receive support for the purchase of new school uniforms, that a revenue grant would be made to fund schools in the transitional period and that a staff salary protection to accommodate any differentiation in earning had been agreed by the Schools Forum. He also informed the meeting of the background of the Schools Organisation Committee (SOC) stating that SOC would meet on the 26th January 2006 to consider any objections and representations received and to reach a decision; the decision would be conveyed in writing to all objectors; SOC could approve, reject or modify the proposal but that if a decision was not reached the issue would be referred to the Independent Schools Adjudicator for a decision, that might result in a delay in the process. He advised that all objections should be made in writing and submitted to Westox House.

The Director of Childrens' Services reiterated the points made by the Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) and acknowledged that closing schools was unpopular and that the decision had not been taken lightly. He commented that all of the Borough's schools were good schools but in order to address the problem of surplus school places, and sustain the quality of education, the decision had to be taken to prevent a considerable financial loss that would impact on education and would lead to staff reductions and increased class sizes.

Following the presentation a discussion took place, during which the following questions were put by members of the public:

- Was Highfields Primary School being kept open until the new build at Christchurch Church of England Primary School had been completed?

In response, the Director of Childrens' Services commented that it a partner arrangement was in place to allow the pupils to remain at Highfields Primary School until the new build at Christchurch was finished.

- Was it true that Highfields Primary School would close regardless of whether the new build took place or not?

In response, the Director of Childrens' Services confirmed that he considered that the new build would go ahead.

- Did parents have any other school option for their children other than to send them to Christchurch Church of England Primary School?
- What was the timescale for completion of the new build at Christchurch Primary School?

The Assistant Director (Childrens' Services) stated that the construction work would not begin until after the SOC meeting on 26th January 2006, but the design work had already commenced.

The Director of Childrens' Services commented that the financial indications were that, subject to all the necessary approvals, the new build work would begin at the end of 2006.

- What was planned with regard to the provision of extra parking facilities at Christchurch Primary School, particularly in view of the fact that a chronic problem already existed?

In response, the Assistant Director (Childrens' Services) stated that close liaison was taking place with the Directorate of the Urban Environment to resolve the parking issue by exploring all options.

With regard to the provision of a playing field, Childrens' Services were striving to ensure that all schools in the Borough had a range of facilities to offer. Further consultation would take place with parents as soon as possible when all options had been explored.

- Would Christchurch Primary School be provided with a playing field facility?

In response, the Assistant Director (Childrens' Services) stated that this issue would be explored.

- Highfields Primary School was already equipped with all the necessary facilities; why cannot measures be taken to improve other facilities at Highfields and keep the school open
- Why cannot Highfields take on extra pupils from across the Borough in order to keep the school open
- What would happen if planning permission were not granted for the building to take place at Christchurch?
- What will happen to the Highfields School building?

- Have the view of parents of children already attending Christchurch Church of England Primary School, been ascertained?
- Could not other children from the Borough be encouraged to attend Highfields to swell the numbers?

In response the Director of Childrens' Services acknowledged parents' commitment and stated that, across the Borough as a whole, there were too many spare places and a reduction in the number of schools was needed before the reduction in school grant came into effect in 2010. He further commented that the closure of any school was contentious, but that the closure of a smaller school meant that fewer pupils were exposed to disruption.

Councillor Davies commented if the Schools Organisation Committee decided to close Highfields Primary then new build was planned for both Christchurch and Wallbrook. He further explained the process regarding the submission of an application for planning permission, and pointed out that a local authority application was not considered any differently to that submitted by any other member of the public.

- What is the view of parents with children attending Christchurch Primary to having more pupils attending the Christchurch Primary?

The Headmistress of Christchurch (who was in the audience) responded that parents of children from both Highfields Primary School and Christchurch Church of England Primary School had already held a meeting and stressed the importance of parents working together,

The Director of Childrens' Services informed the meeting that this meeting was part of the second stage consultation; all comments should be forwarded to Carol Williams, Directorate of Childrens' Services, Westox House, Trinity Road, Dudley.

Councillor Mrs Ridley commented that nobody likes to see schools closed, especially good schools in good buildings and situated within a close community.

The Director of Childrens' Services endorsed Councillor Mrs Ridley's statement regarding school closures and added that Highfields was a good school.

The meeting ended at 8.00 pm.

CHAIRMAN

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